CHAPTER 2

THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF ISRAEL'S SCRIPTURES

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To discuss ecclesiology in relation to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament might seem like a category mistake. For if there is not yet a church (*ecclēsia* in both Greek and Latin) in a pre-Christian context, how is there scope for ecclesiology? Or, to put the point slightly differently, there are some preliminary methodological issues to raise in relation to thinking about the Christian church in relation to Israel's Scriptures before substantive discussion of our topic can get under way.

Establishing a Frame of Reference

One approach could be to say that if there is no church in Israel's Scriptures the issue must be entirely one of looking for historical antecedents: What preceded the church and gave rise to it? But although there must be such a historical dimension to any discussion, Christianity has characteristically regarded the Old Testament not only as prehistory but also as an enduring source and norm for Christian thought and practice. Christian realities may not yet have existed in the original frame of reference of these pre-Christian documents, yet Christian faith can still be shaped by Israel's Scriptures when they are read as the Christian Old Testament.

Alternatively, one might say that there *is* a church in Israel's Scriptures. For a common Hebrew term to depict the 'assembly' of Israel is *qāhāl*, which the Greek translators of the Septuagint generally rendered by *ekklēsia*. Might one then, like some older writers, refer to 'The Church of Israel' (Kennett 1933 [2011])? Yet at the present time, when many Christians are freshly appreciating the importance of Judaism as a living and enduring religious reality, such terminology can feel insensitive and inappropriate. After all, *qāhāl* could also be rendered in Greek by *synagōgē*, and Jewish gatherings are synagogue rather than church.

Rather than lingering on such preliminary puzzles, it may be best directly to set out the premises and frame of reference for this discussion. Central to the Old Testament is Israel as a people called by God to be his people. The New Testament presents a self-understanding of early Christian faith in terms of Jesus' followers still being Israel, but Israel as redefined and reconstituted by the crucified and risen Jesus (thus Galatians 6: 14–16 should probably be read as such a redefinition of 'the Israel of God'). However, although both Jesus and all the first Christians were Jews, the church was soon predominantly made up of Gentiles. The Jewish people for the most part did not recognize Jesus as Messiah/Saviour, and went on to develop their own forms of religious life and thought which are related to their Scriptures and in which they continue to be Israel. That is, rabbinic Judaism developed in terms of the 'oral law', which is expressed in Mishnah and Talmud—and in these works Jesus plays no part. There are thus senses in which the church both is, and is not, Israel.

Israel's Scriptures have given rise to two enduring religious faiths, Judaism and Christianity, synagogue and church. Although each faith takes these Scriptures seriously, for neither of them does it function independently of its recontextualization and appropriation, as Tanakh for Jews and Old Testament for Christians. This means that Jews and Christians read the material differently—not so much at the level of philology or particular literary or historical settings, but rather in terms of which larger frame of reference these texts are set in, which specific texts are appealed to, and which further texts and practices contribute to the task of articulating the enduring meaning and function of the biblical material.

Within a Christian frame of reference, even for Gentiles the story of Israel becomes 'our story', as believers come to recognize that they are incorporated into an antecedent people of God through their response to Jesus Christ. Israel in some sense becomes church. How then might Christians best think of Israel's Scriptures in a way that both illumines the nature and purpose of the church and is able to respect Jewish self-understanding and use of the same Scriptures? The task entails moving beyond the historic Christian hostility to Jews—as classically expressed in the reception of Tertullian's and St John Chrysostom's polemical writings (*Adversus Judaeos*; for a nuanced account of Chrysostom in his context see Wilken 2004)—which has often disfigured Christian history.

Different Ways of Interpreting the Old Testament in Relation to Ecclesiology

Scholarly literature on the nature of Israel as people of God in Israel's Scriptures abounds. However, the distinctive character of the biblical literature gives rise to continuing methodological debates about the best way of handling the literature. This needs

some discussion as the nature of the approach adopted can make a significant difference to one's findings.

Historical Approaches: Hanson and Goldingay

Much modern study of the Old Testament has been conceived as an attempt to reconstruct the history of Israel and its religion, with all its diverse and disparate voices, via the critical analysis and dating of its literature in relation to a wider ancient Near Eastern context (an approach which is driven in part by the recognition that the likely course of Israel's religious development differed, to a greater or lesser extent, from the form it has in the canonical portrayal). Such an approach to the Old Testament, carried out constructively and from a Christian perspective that presumes the enduring significance of the biblical material, is well exemplified in the most weighty discussion of our topic in recent years, Paul Hanson's *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (Hanson 1986). Hanson looks also at Christian community in the New Testament, though is uninterested in Judaism's appropriation of its Scriptures.

Another example, somewhat comparable to Hanson but briefer and more theologically synthetic in approach, is offered by John Goldingay in his discussion of 'The People of God' in the Old Testament (Goldingay 1987: 59–96). Goldingay finds five primary images or modes of being for Israel in the Old Testament, for each of which there are particular Hebrew terms. First is a family (Heb. *mišpāhâ*), which Goldingay speaks of as The Wandering Clan (i.e. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). This pre-political form of existence 'speaks of being a people on the way, between promise and fulfilment, and dependent on the one who brought it into being by his will'. Second is a nation (*'am*) or people (*gōy*), that is The Theocratic Nation (i.e. Moses and Joshua). This 'speaks of living in the world and of learning from it, but of standing over against the world and its religion'. Third is a royal state, a kingdom (*mamlākâ*), which Goldingay depicts as The Institutional State (i.e. the period of Monarchy). This 'speaks of an openness to learn from the world, to let the world provide the vehicles for expressing the faith, and to attract the world to that faith'. Fourth is the remnant (*šeʾērît*), about which Goldingay speaks as The Afflicted Remnant (i.e. Israel/Judah in exile). This 'means recognizing that the final purpose of God cannot be effected in the regular course of human history, because of the waywardness both of God's people and of other nations. It means that God's people are subject to his judgment, but that all is not lost when God cuts his people down to size.' Fifth is a religious community (*qāhāl*), which Goldingay depicts as The Community of the Promise (i.e. Postexilic Israel). This indicates 'a people that . . . recognizes that even when history ceases to be the sphere in which God fulfils his ultimate purpose through them, it does not cease to be the sphere in which they actually have to live; that is honest about what they can believe yet pledged to making sense of the old faith; that is committed to personal discipleship if the corporate seems to lapse; that lives as a people dedicated to the praise of Yahweh for what he has done yet to hope in him for what he is yet to

do'. Alongside these positive implications Goldingay also recognizes the distinct temptations and perils to which each mode of being is exposed, so that there is always a 'this, yet not this' quality to the discussion, in keeping with the Christian theology's classic mode of combining affirmation and denial in its understanding of God and of life in God's world.

Goldingay is also suggestive about the enduring theological insights that should be found by those seeking to appropriate the Old Testament. For example:

> Israel's story suggests that the relationship between life in the Spirit and life in the world is insoluble. The people of God cannot live as a political theocracy ruling the world in Yahweh's name, but neither can they take the way of separation which evades life in the world. Nor is there any way of living in obedience to God and being organized for existence in history. History, politics, and statehood, though inevitable, make it difficult to live as the people of God. The NT has little to add to this OT picture, and church history confirms it. (1987: 88–9)

Goldingay's is a fine example of a synthesis of historical and theological insight.

Canonical and Figural Approaches: Lindbeck and Radner

In recent years, however, there has been a renewed engagement with methodological questions about how best to approach Israel's Scriptures, especially when they are regarded as a continuing source and norm for thought and practice in a contemporary context. Particularly notable has been the work of Brevard Childs, who has articulated a 'canonical approach' (Childs 1992; Driver 2010). Instead of regarding the received, canonical form of the Old Testament as needing a greater or lesser amount of rearrangement, and separating out of voices, in the service of a more accurately historical account of Israel's religion (as in Hanson), Childs has proposed that Israel's traditions in their received form should be the focal point for purposes of theological thinking. He proposes that the familiar texts should be seen as the fruit of a lengthy process of sifting and discerning Israel's traditions, with a view to making their mature understanding of God, Israel, and the world accessible to generations to come, who would thereby be enabled, in their different situations, to enter into the enduring wisdom and truth of Israel's encounter with God. Childs does not deny the likely complexity of the processes that have led to the familiar texts, and indeed argues that some understanding of these processes can nuance one's reading of the text in beneficial ways. But if one focuses on the biblical texts in their received form one is potentially reconnecting both with the concerns of those who edited, preserved, and canonized the texts (so that the fruit of Israel's wisdom would continue to function in new contexts) and with the concerns of those Jews and Christians who articulated the normative forms of Judaism and Christianity in the ancient world. Jews and Christians in antiquity, amidst all the variety of interpretative moves that they made, built their construals of God, Israel, and the world on the texts in their received form.

This approach also means that one need not solely trace historical developments from old to new, from ancient Israel to the church, but one can move dialectically between the two testaments as literary collections that are intertexually related. Such an approach to the text does not attempt to put the clock back or deny the insights of modern scholarship, but rather seeks to embody, in Paul Ricoeur's famous phrase, a 'second naiveté': the recovery of a certain kind of simplicity on the other side of working through issues of great complexity, an ability to take the world of the biblical text with full imaginative and existential seriousness, even as one recognizes that its content does not conform to our modern category of 'history'.

If one adopts this frame of reference, it is still not self-evident how best to work with the biblical text, and more than one approach is possible. One notable example has been the work of Childs's colleague at Yale, George Lindbeck, who from the perspective of contemporary theology has sought a renewed engagement with the biblical text. Lindbeck has proposed that ecclesiology could usefully be thought of as 'Israelology' (Lindbeck 1997 [1987]: 45). Lindbeck draws on the resources of recent narrative theology (which is a way of working with the world of the biblical text as meaningful in itself) to propose a post-modern recovery of classic pre-modern approaches to the biblical text, especially with regard to a typological or figural reading of the Old Testament in the light of Christ:

> The most succinct scriptural warrant for the retrieval of the practice of viewing the church in the mirror of Israel is the text in 1 Corinthians . . . [where] Paul tells us that *all* the things that happened to 'our fathers . . . were written down for our instruction . . .' (10:1, 11). These instructions remain verbally the same as when first recorded, but they are multiple in meaning. God's scriptural word, so Paul believes, fits every conceivable context, and from this follows the possibility that seeing the church as Israel is a biblically mandated universal; it applies in the twenty-first century just as much as in the first. (Lindbeck 2003: 90–1)

The correlation of the church with Israel is, of course, a classic pre-modern Christian approach, but Lindbeck sees it to have been historically disfigured by two questionable moves. On the one hand, Christians considered the church to have superseded historic Israel, and so disparaged Jews. On the other hand, Christians tended to ignore Paul's 'all' and so appealed to the Old Testament selectively: 'They have focused selectively on the favourable prefigurations Paul mentions—on Christ the rock, on manna as type of the Eucharist, on baptism under the cloud—and have neglected his more numerous warnings of the punishments for disobedience to which Christians are liable' (Lindbeck 2003: 91). Indeed, 'the more unsavoury aspects of the history of Israel were no longer genuinely portions of the history of the Church, but were projected exclusively on the synagogue' (Lindbeck 1997 [1987]: 47). So Lindbeck seeks to retrieve the classic notion in a fresh form:

> [T]he relation of Israel's history to that of the church in the New Testament is not one of shadow to reality, or promise to fulfilment, or type to antitype. Rather, the kingdom already present in Christ alone is the antitype, and both Israel and the

> Church are types. The people of God existing in both the old and new ages are typologically related to Jesus Christ, and through Christ, Israel is prototypical for the Church in much the same way that the exodus story, for example, is seen as prototypical for all later Israelite history by such prophets as Ezekiel. Christ is depicted as the embodiment of Israel . . . and the Church is the body of Christ. Thus, in being shaped by the story of Christ, the Church shares (rather than fulfils) the story of Israel. The communal fulfilment will take place in God's kingdom which, though already actualized in the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord, is only anticipated in the communities that witness to him before and after his first coming. (Lindbeck 1997 [1987]: 43)

Thus a positive approach to Jews and Judaism (appreciatively outlined and analysed from a Jewish perspective in Ochs 2011), together with a more humble and ecumenical ecclesial self-understanding, becomes central to Lindbeck's vision; and it represents a handling of the biblical text markedly different from that of Hanson.

A striking development of aspects of Lindbeck's approach can be found in the work of Ephraim Radner. Radner's *The End of the Church* (Radner 1998) propounds an astringent and controversial thesis that the condition of the divided churches of the contemporary world is such that the Holy Spirit is, in an important sense, absent from them. One of Radner's moves is to construe the divided churches scripturally in terms of divided Israel:

> According to the scriptural pattern of divine 'abandonment' in sin, divided Israel was left to encounter its shattered life on its own. This fact determines how we are to view the topic at hand: partitioned Israel is 'abandoned' Israel; and this Israel, separated among its members, is separated too from the Holy Spirit . . . In Ezekiel's terms, the restoration of the Holy Spirit upon the divinely abandoned people of Israel must coincide with their return as a united body (Ezek. 39:25–9). In this way, the prophets make clear that a firm connection exists between the condition of division and the experience of pneumatic deprivation. (Radner 1998: 37–8)

Moreover Radner, like Lindbeck, seeks to move beyond the partisan and self-serving nature of many past appeals to this material, because all churches are implicated:

> From the time of Jeroboam's rebellion and the rending of Israel into northern and southern kingdoms (1 Kings 12), the people of Israel were dragged down into a steady decline marked by internal apostasy and external victimization. Although there were respites and brief reversals to this pattern—for example, Hezekiah's or Josiah's reigns—both kingdoms eventually succumbed to almost total annihilation at the hands of Assyria and Babylon . . .
>
> But while the polemicists of Christian division have tended to apply this story one-sidedly, choosing to identify their particular communities with various righteous 'remnants' alluded to in the course of the narrative, it should be stressed that the narrative as a whole forbids such distinguishing of actors within the history. Both kingdoms are ultimately destroyed; the peoples of both are murdered and

> enslaved; and only the reunion of both as having come through this common ordeal embodies the restoration of Israel in the public arena of time (cf. Jer. 50:2–4). That there was to be a 'remnant' for whom this restoration was ordered is not in question . . . [b]ut . . . [t]he restoration of the remnant is not the unveiling, let alone the vindication, of the 'true church' from amid its travails, but rather the gracious action of recreating a united people out of the dust of their past obliteration (cf. Ezek. 11:14–21). (Radner 1998: 36)

One can of course argue about the specifics of Radner's construal of the divided kingdoms, and note the absence of any close reading of the biblical texts. He says nothing, for example, about the fact that, although for the writers of Kings the northern kingdom is schismatic and more problematic than the southern kingdom, remarkable space (most of 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 13) is given to Elijah and Elisha, whose prophetic ministries are exercised at God's behest in the northern kingdom. The content of Radner's ecclesiological appeal to the Old Testament is also strikingly different from that of Lindbeck, despite their common methodology. But whatever one makes of Radner's overall thesis, it is illuminating as an example of a kind of fresh theological thinking that works with the Old Testament in its received form and in important ways replicates, even while correcting, classic Christian engagement with the material.

I propose in the remainder of this chapter to offer a close reading of selected Old Testament passages, working with the material in its received, canonical form, and making the theological assumption that one should imaginatively bring together Israel and the church—in historical terms, by analogy, and in literary terms, by figuration. Readings of the biblical text will be accompanied, or followed by, reflections on their theological and ecclesiological implications.

The Mission of Israel: God's Call of Abraham

A well-known passage of prime importance is Genesis 12:1–3:

> [1] Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. [2] I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [3] I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed [*or* by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves]. (NRSV)

In canonical context, this divine call of Abraham (I use the familiar form of the name, though in Genesis 12–17 the name is Abram) is central to the transition between the universal primeval history (Genesis 1–11) and the particular history of Israel's ancestors

(Genesis 12–50). It implicitly raises the question of the relationship between Abraham and his descendants (Israel, church) and the world as a whole.

In terms of its classic interpretation, Paul sees the depiction of the families of the earth being blessed in Abraham as anticipating justification of all nations through their believing as Abraham believed (see Galatians 3:6–9 where Paul cites Genesis 12:3b together with Genesis 15:6). We thereby have an Old Testament basis for the mission of the church and its universal proclamation of the gospel. Moreover Gerhard von Rad, probably the most significant Old Testament theologian of the twentieth century, interpreted Genesis 12:1–3 in a way that in effect (*mutatis mutandis*) reformulated Paul's understanding of its significance:

> From the multitude of nations God chooses a man, looses him from tribal ties, and makes him the beginner of a new nation and the recipient of great promises of salvation. What is promised to Abraham reaches far beyond Israel; indeed, it has universal meaning for all generations on earth . . . Truly flesh and blood did not inspire this view beyond Israel and its saving relation to God! With this firm linking of primeval history and sacred history the Yahwist indicates something of the final meaning and purpose of the saving relation that God has vouchsafed to Israel. (von Rad 1972: 152–4, 159–61 [154])

Von Rad has influenced numerous subsequent theologians in seeing God's promise of the blessing of the nations in Abraham and his descendants as the Old Testament basis for the mission of the church. So, for example, Christopher Wright argues:

> So the Gentile mission, Paul argued, far from being a betrayal of the Scriptures, was rather the fulfilment of them. The ingathering of the nations was the very thing Israel existed for in the purpose of God; it was the fulfilment of the bottom line of God's promise to Abraham. Since Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and since the Messiah embodied in his own person the identity and mission of Israel, then to belong to the Messiah through faith was to belong to Israel . . . The words of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28:18–20, the so-called Great Commission, could be seen as a christological mutation of the original Abraham commission—'Go . . . and be a blessing . . . and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you.' (Wright 2006: 194, 213)

Both Israel and the church as Israel are called and blessed by God, and they are commissioned to be agents of enabling that blessing to come to others.

The interpretation of Genesis 12:1–3 is, however, not quite so straightforward (Moberly 2009: 141–61). For example, many interpreters take the divine words to Abraham to 'be a blessing' in the same idiomatic sense that the phrase 'be a blessing' has in contemporary English, that is to embody and mediate benefit or help to another person. Yet such an idiomatic sense is in fact nowhere attested in the Old Testament (Grüneberg 2003: 121), for 'blessing' in such contexts (like 'curse') always means a paradigm of being blessed (or cursed), a paradigm which is invoked as a desired destiny, either good or bad, for someone. Thus Jacob says of Joseph and his sons: 'By you Israel will invoke blessings,

saying, "God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh"' (Genesis 48:20). Alternatively Jeremiah says of two false prophets, Ahab and Zedekiah: '[O]n account of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon: "The LORD make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire"' (Jeremiah 29:22). Thus the likely sense of Abraham's 'being a blessing' is that Abraham will be so blessed by God that others will aspire to his condition for themselves and those they favour, and so say, 'May you be like Abraham.' Abraham is a model, rather than a medium, of being blessed; it is not that others are to receive blessing through him and his descendants, but rather that they will aspire to be blessed like him and his descendants.

Although God's promise of blessing in Genesis 12:1–3 is often reckoned to be for the benefit of the nations, it is more likely that it is primarily for the benefit of Abraham himself and his descendants. When told to leave everything behind (12:1) he might readily fear swift oblivion, and so God reassures him that, far from experiencing oblivion, he will become a great nation, well regarded by others (12:2). God will defend Abraham and his descendants against their enemies, with the result that they will be universally admired and esteemed, a paradigm of being blessed to which others will aspire (12:3, where the disputed sense of the verb in 3b—'be blessed' or 'bless themselves'?—is probably the latter, with NRSV margin). In the midst of a large, and sometimes hostile, world, God will uphold Abraham and his descendants.

To be sure, if the primary sense of Genesis 12:1–3 is that Abraham and his descendants are to be blessed *in spite of*, rather than *for the sake of*, the nations, this does not exclude the possibility that this blessing could in due course come to be understood as being also *for the sake of* other nations. Elsewhere in the Old Testament such an understanding seems to be attested in the words of YHWH to his servant who in some way embodies Israel (Isaiah 49:3). The LORD says:

> It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
> to raise up the tribes of Jacob
> and to restore the survivors of Israel;
> I will give you as a light to the nations,
> that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.
> (Isaiah 49:6)

It can thus become natural to re-read Genesis 12:1–3 with a view to seeing a blessing for the nations as already adumbrated at the outset of Israel's story. Arguably this is what is happening in Paul's reading of Genesis, which, Francis Watson argues, 'can justly claim to realize something of the semantic potential of a complex and polysemic text' (Watson 2004: 183). Paul reads the biblical text in the Septuagint, where the verb in Genesis 12:3b is passive, 'in you will all the tribes of the earth be blessed', which makes it natural to read the text as envisaging Abraham and his descendants not just modelling but bringing blessing to the whole world.

Moreover, this interpretative move (Israel's call is for the sake of the world) is not just a characteristic of Christian faith, for many Jews have also historically understood their

vocation as Israel to be in some way for the sake of the world, even though neither the Hebrew Scriptures nor Jewish tradition envisage the world in general as actually adopting, or being expected to adopt, Israel's religion (even though a few people might do so). For example, the Jewish Renaissance philosopher and biblical scholar Abravanel said, 'All the families of the earth will be blessed, provided for and benefitted on his account, for the world will become aware of God through Abraham and his offspring. Blessing and providence will adhere to any people that adopt his discipline and his faith' (Greenberg 1995: 240). More recently Yoram Hazony, in the course of arguing that the Hebrew Bible is a work of moral and political philosophy that is of universal significance because 'the Israelite cause is the cause of all mankind', appeals to Genesis 12:1–3 as the prime biblical statement of his thesis. After citing 12:1–3 (with the rendering '... be blessed' in v. 3b) he comments: '[T]he father of the Jewish people is introduced to us as a man who will somehow be a "blessing" to all the peoples on the earth, with the implication that Abraham's people will somehow bear this blessing with them for all nations' (Hazony 2012: 59, 111).

Genesis 12:1–3 thus provides a good example of how historic Jewish and Christian faiths can encourage a re-reading of the biblical text so as to find in it a fuller sense than was perhaps initially envisaged. The divine commitment to uphold Abraham and his descendants is clear on any reckoning, and an extension to others of that blessing which Israel enjoys becomes an intuitive way of reading the text within a Jewish or Christian frame of reference. For Christians Abraham becomes paradigmatic of faith/trust in God as a transformative reality for all humanity, an exemplar of divine blessing upon human life that is made accessible in principle through the mission of the church.

The Prophetic Critique of Israel: Three Temple Sermons

The life of Israel, as portrayed in the Old Testament, focuses on the worship of God, an activity which should, in principle (from the perspective of the canonical writers), take place in the temple in Jerusalem. The temple is a place of enormous symbolic significance, a place where YHWH is in some way specially present. The Psalms in particular often celebrate Zion as the focus of YHWH's delight, the place where his people can expect to meet with him and receive his blessing. Here Israel sings, 'God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved ... The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge' (Psalm 46:5, 7 [Heb. vv. 6, 8]; compare Psalm 48).

However, a basic understanding that is widely shared among Israel's prophets is concisely articulated by Amos: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' (3:2). Being called and chosen by God brings with it special responsibility (as Jesus puts it, where much is given, there much is expected, Luke 12:48). A recurrent failure on the part of Israel/Judah to live up to those expectations and conduct themselves in a way commensurate with the presence of God

in their midst is a prime concern in the prophetic literature, and can be instructively focused on three famous 'temple sermons' (cf. Moberly 2008). I will first read these three sermons, and then reflect upon them.

Amos's Temple Sermon (Amos 5:18–27)

The first passage, Amos 5:18–27, is a direct address to people engaged in the practices of temple worship, and so is in that sense a temple sermon, whether or not the reader should imagine Amos speaking the words in a temple (perhaps, in Amos's context, the temple of the northern kingdom at Bethel, as in Amos 7:10–13). Amos says:

18 Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why do you want the day of the LORD?
It is darkness, not light;
19 as if someone fled from a lion,
and was met by a bear;
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
and was bitten by a snake.
20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?

The people Amos addresses have a confident expectation associated with God, an expectation depicted as 'the day of YHWH' (v. 18). The precise nature of this day is assumed to be known, and although present-day readers no longer share that assumption, it seems to have entailed some kind of celebration within the temple. This day could be expected to be 'light' (vv. 18, 20), which would presumably mean a time of joy for God's people. But Amos inverts this: 'darkness, not light' is how the day of YHWH will be (v. 20). It is illustrated by a picture of a man trying to escape deadly animals, but escaping one danger only to be met by another (v. 19); the day of YHWH will confound hopeful expectation.

Why should this be? A reason (additional to those found earlier in the text of Amos) is immediately given.

21 I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
22 Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
24 But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This text focuses on YHWH's priorities, both what he seeks and what he rejects, in relation to what the people are doing in their temple worship. The point is emphatic: worship without a concomitant practice of justice and righteousness is not merely worthless but actively affronts YHWH and is even an object of loathing to him. The imagery of rolling, ever-flowing waters (v. 24) suggests that the practice of justice and righteousness should be both strong and constant, an integral aspect of Israel's life. Integrity in public life is the *sine qua non* of true worship.

> [25] Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness,
> O house of Israel? [26] You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god,
> your images that you made for yourselves; [27] therefore I will take you into exile be-
> yond Damascus, says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.

In this difficult section Israel's worship is seen as too readily directed to recipients other than YHWH (vv. 25, 26), such that YHWH is not the 'one and only' focus of Israel's acts of devotion (as Israel is to recite daily in the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4–9). Consequently, Israel will not only lose temple and land by going into exile, but YHWH himself will be the instigator of that loss (v. 27), presumably through the agency of one of Israel's enemies. The 'day of YHWH' will be darkness, and the form that the darkness will take will be the loss of home through defeat and deportation. YHWH becomes, as it were, the enemy of his chosen people.

Micah's Temple Sermon (Micah 3:9–12)

No narrative context is given for this material, but again its content qualifies it as a temple sermon. Moreover, the appeal to Micah's words as a precedent for Jeremiah in the narrative account of Jeremiah's temple sermon (Jeremiah 26, especially vv. 17–19) implicitly locates Micah within Jerusalem, and the text of Micah is imaginatively open to such a location. Micah says:

> [9] Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
> and chiefs of the house of Israel,
> who abhor justice
> and pervert all equity,
> [10] who build Zion with blood
> and Jerusalem with wrong!
> [11] Its rulers give judgement for a bribe,
> its priests teach for a price,
> its prophets give oracles for money;
> yet they lean upon the LORD and say,
> 'Surely the LORD is with us!
> No harm shall come upon us.'

Micah's address is blunt. He speaks to the leaders of Israel, those with responsibility for its common life (3:9a), and portrays them as corrupt, failing in their obligations for just dealings in public (3:9b), and maltreating those labouring on public and/or private building projects with a harshness that is careless of life (3:10). The leadership in its various forms—both 'secular' (rulers) and 'spiritual' (priests, prophets)—is venal; the justice and guidance that should enable healthy communal life have become commodities, to be had only for a price (3:11a). Yet apparently these leaders do not see their conduct as incompatible with strong religious claims; they acknowledge their dependence upon YHWH, and claim YHWH's presence in their midst, which is clearly a reference to the Jerusalem temple as the focal point of YHWH's presence with Israel/Judah; and they regard YHWH's presence in the temple as a guarantee of security from their enemies (as celebrated in, for example, Psalms 46 and 48).

Micah continues:

> [12] Therefore because of you
> Zion shall be ploughed as a field;
> Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
> and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Micah brusquely draws out the implications of the mismatch between the leaders' practice and their religious claims. It is precisely because of their complacent corruption that the disaster that they are confident cannot happen will happen: city and temple together will be reduced to ruins overgrown by vegetation. What will happen to the people is not specified; though insofar as the site of city and temple returns to the wild, the implication is that its inhabitants will not be there to rebuild, and so will either be dead or deported into exile.

Jeremiah's Temple Sermon (Jeremiah 7:1–15)

Jeremiah's words are a temple sermon because of their explicit narrative setting. Their content is similar to that of those passages just considered.

> [1] The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: [2] Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD. [3] Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell [following NRSV margin, in preference to 'let me dwell with you'] in this place. [4] Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'

Jeremiah is to position himself and speak in a place of maximal exposure to temple worshippers. First, he challenges temple worshippers to change the way they are living

(v. 3a). Secondly, he holds out a positive consequence of such turning, which is that YHWH will let the people of Judah stay in their land and not (by implication) be defeated by their enemies with consequent deportation for the survivors (v. 3b). (The NRSV margin, which follows the MT vocalization, is the better text because the threat of exile is the note on which the primary section of the sermon ends (v. 15), and so the possibility of averting exile is appropriate to the introduction of the message.) Thirdly, he warns against a deceptive thought, a false presumption, that is the (implicit) assumption that YHWH's presence in the temple means security for Judah from its enemies (v. 4).

The rest of Jeremiah's address expands these three points.

> 5 For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, 7 then I will let you dwell [as in v. 3] in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors for ever and ever.

First, Jeremiah gives fuller content to the initial challenge to amendment, and spells out what is involved. The basic requirement is to practise justice, the same keyword as in Amos (5:24) and Micah (3:9). This is specified in terms of not taking advantage of those of whom advantage might most easily be taken—the resident foreigner, the orphan, the widow—because they lacked normal social security as embodied in kin or head of the house. As so often in Israel's Scriptures, the assumption is that if justice is given to those who are most easily denied it, then justice is most likely to be practised elsewhere too. The 'shedding of innocent blood' could envisage either the oppressive maltreatment of labourers (as in Micah 3: 10), or the manipulation of legal procedure (as against Naboth, 1 Kings 21), or possibly some other malpractice; whichever way it is understood, exploitation and violence are seen as the denial of justice. Going after other gods represents fundamental disloyalty to YHWH (a denial of the first of the Ten Commandments and of the Shema), and would also entail Judah's undoing ('to your own hurt'). In all these ways, Jeremiah's hearers are challenged to change for the better.

Also, YHWH's gift to Israel/Judah of its land in perpetuity ('for ever and ever') is implied to be no guarantee against YHWH's depriving them of that gift. The prophetic understanding is that gift implies expectation, and so failure to live up to expectation can imperil the gift. Jeremiah's account of what that expectation entails now leads into his speaking further about how the people of Judah's belief in their security with YHWH, because of his presence in the temple, has in fact become false, and so idolatrous.

> 8 Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. 9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say 'We are safe!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? 11 Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.

Just as vv. 5–7 expanded v. 3, so now vv. 8–11 expand v. 4. The people's mantra, their 'deceptive words', 'This is the temple of the LORD', is now resumed and clarified by the claim 'We are safe', which makes explicit the belief that YHWH's presence in the temple means the deliverance of Jerusalem from its enemies. Yet Jeremiah sees self-contradiction here. In essence, Jeremiah's point is that the claim to YHWH's presence and protection is self-involving language, language that implies a human way of living commensurate with the divine presence that is invoked. But Judah is living in flagrant disregard of YHWH's priorities, and their specified transgressions read like a summary of disobedience to the Ten Commandments. To suppose that one can use the language of YHWH's presence and protection and yet detach oneself from the intrinsic moral and spiritual requirements of YHWH's will is to misunderstand one's language, to empty it of content, and to abuse it. This is what turns the claims about YHWH's temple, which on one level are factually true—the building *was* the temple of YHWH—into something deceptive, a falsehood.

Jeremiah next develops further the issue mentioned in v. 3b, only casting it now not as hopeful possibility but as pure warning of disaster, where the possibility of hope can only be realized if the warning is heeded and acted upon:

> [12] Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. [13] And now, because you have done all these things, says the LORD, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, [14] therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. [15] And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.

The warning is backed by appeal to a precedent—the temple of YHWH at Shiloh which by Jeremiah's time had been reduced to ruins and had been abandoned (i.e. Shiloh exemplified Micah's depiction of Jerusalem: Micah 3:12). If the corruption of Israel led to the overthrow of Shiloh, then the heedless and unresponsive corruption of Judah can similarly lead to Jerusalem's overthrow at the hands of an enemy, operating at YHWH's behest. The consequence will be the familiar fate of the vanquished, already experienced by the northern kingdom—deportation into exile. The tragic irony is that YHWH himself, to whose divine presence in the temple the people of Judah complacently appeal as protection against disaster, will be the primary cause and agent of that disaster.

Some Implications of the Temple Sermons

The common concerns in these three temple sermons should be clear. Each criticizes corrupt practice in temple worship, which could be summarized as a failure concomitantly to practise justice; each criticizes spurious trust in YHWH, focused in some way upon

his presence in the temple; each sees the trust as spurious because it is complacent and has become detached from an obedience commensurate with the trust; each warns of a coming destruction of the temple and/or a deportation into exile; and each sees the destruction and/or exile as the act of YHWH (albeit through human agency). Put differently, although the people claim to trust their God, they show by their actions that they do not know him and his ways; arguably, in an important sense they do not really want to be his covenant people; but this is to deny their basic identity, and leads only to calamity.

In reflecting on this material it is important to resist oversimplifying shorthand formulations, such as 'ethics trumps ritual'. It is one thing to say that the rituals of worship without appropriate moral practice are empty, indeed offensive; it is another to denigrate ritual as such in relation to moral practice. To be sure, it is sometimes suggested that Amos genuinely proposes abolishing animal and cereal sacrifice altogether (as also other prophets when they criticize Israel's sacrificial worship) (Barton 2012: 84–92, 197), perhaps in favour of faithful moral practice as the 'true sacrifice'. Of course, such a metaphorical move is indeed made in the New Testament, as in Romans 12:1–2, and it has an important role in Christian thought and practice. But in terms of Amos himself this suggestion surely depends on too wooden a reading of the prophetic rhetoric. So startling a religious innovation would require much more to be said about it than Amos or any other prophet actually says.

Similarly, it is probably unhelpful to see the critiques of presumed security in and through the temple as representing rejection of 'Zion theology' as expressed in Isaiah and the Psalms (e.g. Bright 1977, Sweeney 2003). This in effect transposes the existential issues that intrinsically surround the implications of trust and obedience in relation to God into a conflictual history of ideas. It is not that the latter may not have existed. But we have no hard evidence, only the varying plausibility of inferences from a biblical corpus which never mentions such a conflict but is open in places to be read as implying it. The real challenge that the canonical material presents is to be able to hold together a confidence in God's presence and protection, as in Isaiah and the Psalms, with a clear-eyed recognition of how easily that confidence can be corrupted in self-serving ways.

Within a Christian context two prime symbols of confidence in God are the Bible and the Eucharist. In many and various ways these are understood to be vehicles of the divine presence, and as such become focal points of hope and expectation, and also of assurance that God is with his people. Yet contemporary Christians no less than ancient Israelites may live in ways that conflict with the implications of their symbols, and fundamentally misunderstand God's nature and ways. As such the prophetic censure of religious practices emptied of their real meaning loses none of its significance.

The Future of Israel: Exile and Hope

The category of Israel/Judah in exile has become central to much recent scholarship. On any reckoning, the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and the subsequent exile of

many of its inhabitants receive much space within the Old Testament, and are seen as a major turning-point in biblical history. In historical-critical approaches, the exile has increasingly been seen as the catalyst for the formation and preservation of many of the documents that comprise Israel's Scriptures. Among ideological critics the category of 'exile' has become problematic, insofar as it privileges one particular perspective, that of the canonical writers and compilers, over other possible perspectives on the historical realities of the period (though it is a time about which we know all too little). Among some contemporary theologians the category of 'exile' has seemed fruitful as a way of depicting the situation of the churches in a post-Christendom and increasingly secularized Western culture.

Towards Theological Thinking about the Exile

The prime theological issue that exile poses is that of God's ultimate purposes for his people. Does there come a point when their failures lead to God's casting them off and having done with them? Or is God's commitment to his people irrevocable, such that he will always make a new future possible for them? This is a recurrent issue that takes many forms both within the Old Testament and within historic Christian thought—not only in terms of whether or not Christians have replaced Jews as God's people, but also whether or not the contemporary church can properly hope for a future as well as a past.

Numerous interpretative debates revolve around this issue. For example, Martin Noth famously proposed that the primary history of Israel that ends with the Babylonian exile at the end of the books of Kings (the 'Deuteronomistic History') was written as an account of human failure which envisaged the end of Israel and Judah: 'Clearly he [the deuteronomistic author] saw the divine judgement which was acted out in his account of the external collapse of Israel as a nation as something final and definitive and he expressed no hope for the future' (Noth 1981 [1943]: 97). Numerous other scholars, from von Rad onwards (von Rad 1953 [1948]), have proposed more hopeful readings of the material, usually with reference to God's promises to the house of David (2 Samuel 7) and perhaps also the release of the Davidic king from prison as the very last scene (2 Kings 25:27–30). Since the text is open to be read in more than one way, overall interpretations are not unlikely to be indebted to the interpreter's larger theological sense of 'how things go' in the purposes of God.

Alternatively, there is the question of whether Amos, for example, when he said, 'The end has come upon my people Israel' (Amos 8:2) and other comparable things, really meant what he said. Did he really mean that God's election of, and covenant with, Israel was now terminated? Some interpreters insist that such a reading is the plain sense of the text, and that to suppose otherwise is to evade a hard message. Since the book as it stands contains more hopeful notes also, and finishes with a picture of Israel wonderfully restored (9:11–15), they assume that these other passages must be the work of later writers who saw things differently from Amos (Barton 2012: 70–132). This interpretation

is, of course, possible, though we will never actually know. It provides a good example of the modern scholarly tendency to transpose theological tensions within the biblical text into a developing history of ideas. But even if one grants the likelihood of the proposed history of thought on its own terms, there remains the question of how best to read the text in its received form, and whether there may be an integrity to the whole that is more than the sum of its parts. As the book of Amos stands, perhaps the greatest interpretative challenge is to attend to the promised hope that frames its message without allowing that hope in any way to trivialize the awfulness of the divine judgement upon Israel's complacency and corruption. In other words, how can one articulate ultimate hope in God in a way that does not diminish or undercut the seriousness of the call to heed God's moral challenge in the here and now (an undercutting famously represented by the words ascribed to Heinrich Heine on his deathbed, 'Dieu me pardonnera. C'est son métier')?

The Concept of a Remnant

One of the prime ways in which the Old Testament articulates hope for the future beyond disaster is through the idea of a remnant (Hebrew *šeʾār*)—a faithful few who will constitute the core of a renewed people. Probably the idea of a remnant is best known in relation to famous prophetic texts: for example, Isaiah's son Shear-jashub, whose name means 'a remnant will return' (Isaiah 7:3–9); or YHWH's words to Elijah that, despite a coming bloodbath, 'I will leave [verbal form of *šeʾār*] seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal' (1 Kings 19:18). But arguably the Flood narrative in Genesis should be read as the paradigmatic portrayal of the faithful remnant—in the person of Noah (and his somewhat faceless family)—who survive disaster and enable a fresh beginning subsequently. The key term *šeʾār* is used in verbal form of Noah and his family just at the point when the flood waters have wiped out all other life on earth and the story is at its nadir (Genesis 7:23b). The location of the Flood narrative at the outset of Israel's Scriptures, which gives it a framing function in relation to all that follows, makes its portrayal of disaster through divine judgement, yet with a purpose of preserving a remnant so that there can be a new beginning, an archetypal resource for thinking about the prophetic portrayal of divine judgement and disaster in the course of history for Israel and Judah—and by extension for the Church also.

Israel and the Golden Calf

Another paradigmatic Old Testament narrative in this context is the story of the golden calf and covenant renewal at Mount Sinai (Exodus 32–4). To utilize this story for thinking about exile and hope does not depend on supposing the story to have been written or edited around the time of the exile—which it may, or may not, have been.

In itself, it is a story set at the outset of Israel's life as YHWH's covenant people, which poses in archetypal form the issue that recurs through Israel's history: Does Israel's breaking of the covenant terminate the covenant? Does Israel's faithlessness nullify God's faithfulness?

The context of the story makes it as weighty as could be (Moberly 1983). The people of Israel are still at Sinai, the mountain of God, where they have just entered into their covenant with YHWH. But as soon as Moses' back is turned (while he is on the mountain with God to receive the tablets of stone on which God's way for Israel is recorded), Israel make a calf and proclaim it as their deity (Exodus 32:1–6). This act is seen as fundamental apostasy, in other words a kind of equivalent to committing adultery on one's wedding night. But although YHWH proposes to terminate Israel and make a fresh start with Moses (32:7–10), Moses shows his greatness in declining the offer and imploring YHWH to keep his commitment to the Israel that currently exists; to which YHWH accedes (32:11–14). This sets up the basic dynamic of the story—the judgement and mercy of YHWH, mediated through the faithful intercession of Moses (who arguably represents God to God; see Anderson 2008: 216–24, 229–31)—which the rest of the narrative develops.

After further depictions of divine anger and judgement towards Israel, which brings death to some, the turning point comes when YHWH 'speaks face to face with Moses, as one speaks to a friend' (33:11). Thereafter Moses intercedes at length in such a way that YHWH promises, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The LORD" ' (33:19). This episode paves the way for the divine self-revelation in the following chapter, the most extended depiction of the name and nature of God in the Old Testament—though not without a further qualification, that Moses will see only YHWH's back and not his face, which preserves the divine mystery, since the fullest self-depiction of God by God is said to be like seeing God only from behind and not face to face (33:20–3). God then reveals himself:

> The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,
> 'The LORD, the LORD,
> a God merciful and gracious,
> slow to anger,
> and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
> keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
> forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
> yet by no means clearing the guilty,
> but visiting the iniquity of the parents
> upon the children
> and the children's children,
> to the third and fourth generation.' (34:6–7)

Israel has been fundamentally faithless. Yet the emphasis in the divine words is strongly on the divine mercy. There remains a note of judgement ('by no means clearing the

guilty . . .'), which conveys that the divine mercy is not leniency and that right and wrong still matter. But the point is that, if there is to be a future for Israel, then that future depends on divine mercy to the undeserving. On this basis Moses prays a final prayer (34:9) and the covenant is renewed, with an emphasis on the awesome nature of such a renewal of relationship in this context (34:10).

The wording of Moses' final prayer is also striking, for he mentions that Israel 'is a stiff-necked people' (34:9b), even though Israel's being a stiff-necked people has been mentioned three times previously, each time on God's lips as a reason for God's anger towards, and distancing himself from, Israel (32:9; 33:3, 5). This paradoxically makes the point that Israel has not changed, and is still as stiff-necked when the covenant is renewed as when they broke it; so the renewal and hope for the future emphatically lie in God.

A similar feature can be found also in the Flood narrative (Moberly 2009: 118–20), where the corruption of the human heart, which YHWH mentions as a reason for sending the Flood (Genesis 6:5), is mentioned again in the context of YHWH's responding to Noah's sacrifice by promising never again to send a flood (8:21). Again, the point appears to be that humanity is no more deserving after the Flood than before, and that therefore if there is hope for the future that hope is located in the mercy of God. There is thus a direct analogy between how God deals with the world as a whole (in the Flood narrative) and how he deals with his chosen people (in the golden calf narrative). In each context people are unchanging, but God, who indeed judges sin, is nonetheless merciful, and this mercy is, as it were, the bottom line.

It is thus apparent that the issues about Israel's possible future, which are posed by the prophets in relation to Israel's history in the promised land—after faithlessness, judgement, and exile, is there hope for the future?—are raised archetypally at the outset of Israel's story in its canonical presentation. When similar things are said in the book of Jeremiah, the reader should hardly be surprised:

> Thus says the LORD,
> who gives the sun for light by day
> and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,
> who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—
> the LORD of hosts is his name:
> If this fixed order were ever to cease
> from my presence, says the LORD,
> then also the offspring of Israel would cease
> to be a nation before me for ever.
> Thus says the LORD:
> If the heavens above can be measured,
> and the foundations of the earth below can be explored,
> then I will reject all the offspring of Israel
> because of all they have done,
> says the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:35–7)

Conclusion

If one is to utilize the portrayal of the people of God in the Old Testament for constructive ecclesiological thought and practice in a Christian context, it is important to look at the canonical portrayal as a whole. Although the focus here has been on three core areas—vocation and assurance, warning and challenge, failure and hope—there is of course much else in the Old Testament that could also be used.

Perhaps the appropriate note on which to conclude is that a Christian refusal to see God's covenant with the Jews as revoked, whatever their failures, gives grounds for the churches also to hope that, whatever their failures, the God whose character and purposes they discern in Scripture, and whom they know in Jesus Christ, will yet have a future for them in his service.

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